

Athletes, athletes' commissions, and the governance of international sport organisations

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Abstract keywords

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Aim of research

In recent years, there has been increased focus on the governance of sport organisations at the international level (cf. Forster, 2006; Houlihan, 2004; Katwala, 2000). Part of this focus has included concerns that athletes have often not been considered as central stakeholders in the governance of sport. Recent highly mediated events involving the deaths of athletes in prominent international sport events (i.e., in competition and/or in training) have raised issues about athletes' safety and well-being in international sport (cf. the death of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili in a training run at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games; the death of Canadian Sarah Burke in training at a 2012 Superpipe freestyle ski *Monster*-sponsored event in 2012 in Park City, Utah, United States; and the death of Canadian Nik Zoricic at the 2012 World Cup Skicross event in Grindelwald, Switzerland). In some of these cases, athletes had publicly raised concerns about the design and safety of these courses/events, however, decision makers and policy makers seemingly did not take their voices into consideration (cf. Robinson, 2012).

Theoretical background/literature review

As noted by Thibault, Kihl, and Babiak (2010, p. 297), "athlete involvement in the management of IFs [international sport federations] appears to have increased in recent years, however, their level of effectiveness or impact on decision making/policy making remains largely unknown. Additional research is needed to investigate the impact athletes have had on the governance of IFs." The authors also explained that additional research focusing on interviewing athletes about "the most effective methods for their involvement in policies and decisions that affect them" could lead to "better governance of these organizations" (Thibault et al., 2010, p. 298). Building on this work and on the works of Forster (2006) and Katwala (2000) on the governance and democratisation of international sport federations as well as on the representation of athletes' voices in international sport federations, the purpose of this research was to investigate the role of athletes and the Athletes' Commissions in the governance of sport organisations. Specifically, we are interested in the roles athletes play individually and collectively as members of their international sport federation's Athletes' Commission and their impact on the decision making and policy making within their international sport federations.

Research method

A qualitative approach was selected to study the Athletes' Commissions within a select number of international sport federations (i.e., Badminton World Federation, Fédération internationale de ski, and International Triathlon Union). The first step in the study consisted of analyses of organisational documents and the sport federations' websites as well as initial contact with the executives of the federations to determine the existence of an Athletes' Commission and the involvement of athletes within this commission. The second step is ongoing and consists of interviews with members of the Athletes' Commissions along with members of the Executive Committee of the international sport federations to uncover the role athletes and Athletes' Commissions play in decisions and policies that directly affect athletes in international sport.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

Initial findings revealed that leaders of sport federations are not always acting in the athletes' best interests. Leaders tend to make policies and decisions related to the protection and/or promotion of the commercial interests of their federation rather than on the welfare of their athletes. The findings also found a disconnect between the perceptions of leaders in the roles athletes and Athletes' Commissions play in the governance of international sport federations and the perceptions of athletes. Leaders believe athletes and members of the Athletes' Commissions are involved in decisions that directly affect them while athletes and members of the Athletes' Commissions feel their involvement is mostly superficial; their input is rarely sought, and their concerns are not often considered. This finding is supported by previous research where the representation of athletes in international sport federations was mostly tokenistic in nature (Houlihan, 2004). Therefore, even if leaders of international sport federations appear to involve greater athlete representation in their governance, athletes and members of Athletes' Commissions believe their voices are not heard when decisions and policies that affect them are made. Recommendations to enhance athlete involvement in decision making and policy making within international sport federations will be provided as well as suggestions for future research.

References

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